Running head: Personality and Car Status

Not only Assholes Drive Mercedes. Besides Disagreeable men, also Conscientious People Drive High Status Cars.

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Abstract (150/150)

In a representative sample of Finnish car owners (N = 1892) we connected the Five-Factor Model personality dimensions to driving a high status car. Regardless of whether income was included in the logistic model, disagreeable men and conscientious people in general were particularly likely to drive high status cars. The results regarding Agreeableness are consistent with prior work that has argued for the role of narcissism in status consumption. Regarding Conscientiousness, the results can be interpreted from the perspective of self-congruity theory, according to which consumers purchase brands that best reflect their actual or ideal personalities. An important implication is that the association between driving a high status car and unethical driving behaviour may not, as is commonly argued, be due to the corruptive effects of wealth. Rather, certain personality traits, such as low agreeableness, may be associated with both unethical driving behaviour and with driving a high status car.

Keywords: Personality; Consumption; Status; Five-Factor Model; Driving Behaviour

BenVanAllen. (2018, June 26). Do assholes drive Mercedes, or does driving a Mercedes turn you into an asshole? [Tweet].

https://twitter.com/BenVanAllen/status/1011777308980490240

The present research was motivated by personal experience. The authors have noticed that the motorists showing scant regard for traffic rules by, e.g., speeding, tailgating, passing without signaling, and generally driving aggressively tend to be men and tend to drive high status cars. Could it be that certain people, who are generally more aggressive or antagonistic towards people, norms, and obligations, are more likely to drive high status cars? The academic literature on the topic shows that drivers of high status cars are, indeed, more likely to e.g. cheat at busy four-way-stop intersections and to cut off pedestrians (e.g., Krahé, & Fenske, 2002; Piff et al., 2012). However, this has been interpreted as evidence for the morally corruptive effects of wealth, and there is no research on whether a certain type of people are, from the get-go, more likely to drive high-status cars.

The Five-Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) is currently the most widely used framework for investigating individual differences in personality traits. There is, however, no research on the associations between FFM traits and consumer preferences in the car market. Moreover, also more general research on the consumption of various types of high status products has mostly ignored the FFM. Instead, research on the psychological dispositions underlying status consumption has focused on trait narcissism. Narcissism is a construct with multiple faces, but the most prominent theories conceptualize narcissism as something akin to entitled self-importance or grandiose-exhibitionism (Rogoza, Cieciuch, Strus, & Baran, 2019). Narcissists are in across different theoretical approaches typically characterized as immodest, self-promotional, self-enhancing, and seeking keenly to self-enhance, They strive to positively distinguish themselves, and are thus inclined to purchase consumer products that enable them to do so; i.e., they prefer exclusive products that allow them to promote their personal uniqueness (e.g. Lee, Gregg, & Park, 2013; Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007).

Most pertinent to the present research, which employs the framework offered by the FFM to conceptualize individual differences, work integrating narcissism with other personality theories (Rogoza et al., 2019) suggests that especially some types of narcissists, such as the Disinhibited (unrestrained, low frustration tolerance, aggression and antagonism towards people, social norms, and obligations) and the Sensation-Seeking (impulsive, stimulation seeking) could be particularly prone to violate traffic laws. These types of narcissists are characterized by low FFM Agreeableness (Rogoza et al., 2019). Agreeableness may in the current context be a particularly potent explanatory trait because the above referred to types of unethical driving behavior have also been robustly associated with low agreeableness. Agreeableness has been inversely associated with aggressive driving behavior, moving violations, motor vehicle accidents, and losses of vehicular control (e.g., Dahlen & White, 2006).

The above reasoning suggests that some forms of narcissism could underlie the association between driving a high status car and violation of traffic laws. However, also other traits may be relevant. Personality research in marketing has been dominated by self-congruity theory (Dolich, 1969; Helgeson & Supphellen, 20004). According to this approach consumers purchase brands that best reflect their actual or ideal personalities. One of the few studies to link FFM traits with status consumption found that those scoring high on FFM Conscientiousness; i.e., individuals who described themselves as reliable, hard-working, and successful, preferred prestigious brands that communicated these traits to others (Casidy, 2012). Moreover, supporting our above argument regarding the role of narcissism, the study also found that those scoring low in Agreeableness preferred more prestigious brands. Of the other FFM traits, low Openness to Experience also predicted preference for prestigious brands.

Based on the above, we expected those scoring low in Agreeableness, high in Conscientiousness, or low in Openness to Experience to be more likely to drive high status cars. The price of high status cars may put them out of reach of some consumers. We also looked at the possible moderating effects of sex, as men are more likely to have high status cars (Baltas & Saridakis, 2013). The choice of control variables, as well as choices on how to handle response acquiescence and outliers, gave us many degrees of freedom and may raise fears of post-hoc

analyses (“ p-hacking”). To alleviate such concerns, we present result obtained had we made different choices in the Supplementary Online Material (SOM) and focus on results that do not depend on these choices. The data along with other supplementary material (Tables S1-S4, R script) is available at: https://osf.io/cywu4/?view_only=2085cb811e7149c78af61f5f140c0690

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants completed the XS5 in conjunction with a survey that was conducted by a commercial survey company, Taloustutkimus Oy, on behalf of one of their clients. This client was primarily interested in the public perception of their products, and most items assessed respondents’ attitudes and preferences with regards to various consumer products. The survey company employed an internet panel that it had previously recruited and that was representative of the Finnish adult population in terms of age, sex, education, and internet use. Participants (N = 2422; 1241 females, mean age = 53.5 (SD = 15.2, range 17-80, median = 56) were compensated for their time with lottery tickets (the prizes were mainly gift cards). A total of 530 participants were excluded from the final set of participants: 327 did not have a car and 25 reported as their only car a make that was not listed in the survey. In addition, 208 chose not the report their household income. The final sample size was thus 1892. Outliers were defined as those who scored at least 1.5 times the interquartile range below (above) the first (third) quartile on at least one trait scale and were excluded from all analyses. Including outliers did not change any of the conclusions (see SOM Table S1).

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Personality. Personality was measured with the Finnish language version of the 30-item eXtra Short Five (XS5; Konstabel et al., 2017) personality questionnaire, which was created to mimic the NEO PI-R – probably the most widespread and extensively validated measure of the traits identified by the Five-Factor Model (Costa and McCrae, 1992). Trait-wise correspondence between the XS5 and the NEO PI-R measures ranges from r = .77 (Agreeableness) to r = .89 (Neuroticism; Konstabel et al., 2017). The internal consistency reliabilities of the XS5 were .78, .71, .61, .50, and .69, for

ratings of N, E, O, A, and C respectively. We controlled for response acquiescence – as is recommended in representative samples – by partialling the subject's mean response from each item before calculating the scale sums (Ten Berge, 1999). Controlling for response acquiescence or excluding the outliers did not change the conclusions of the study (see SOM Table S2).

2.2.2 Income. Income was assessed by one item which asked participants to indicate their total family income in the past year before taxes and deductions. The UN Canberra Group Handbook (2011) notes that household income, rather than personal income, is generally the preferred measure for economic well-being – although income is usually received by individuals, it is normally shared with other household members. Responses ranged from 1 (*less than €10,000*) to 10 (*€90,000 and above*) with mean income of 5.45 (*SD* = 2.25). The associations between income and personality were generally weak (see SOM Table S4), and the results were virtually identical regardless of whether income was controlled for (SOM Table S3).

2.2.3 Make of car. Participants were asked to indicate the make of their car(s). Only the 30 most common and currently available car makes in Finland were included as response options. The mean number of cars in the household was 1.33 (*SD* = 0.59, median = 1) with a maximum number of 5 cars. Altogether 536 participants reported more than one car.

2.2.4 Car status. We asked thirteen individuals (snow-balling technique) who considered themselves experts on cars to rate the status values of each the thirty car makes. The mean age of the raters (one female) was 50.8 years (SD = 15.7), and they had owned an average of 7.8 (*SD* =5.3) cars. Status of the maker was rated on scale from one (*extremely low status*) to seven (*extremely high status*). Agreement between raters was high (ICC = .95; 95% CI = .92 - .97). The distribution of car status means calculated across raters was non-normal (Shapiro-Wilk normality test, $p < .01$) and visually resembling a mixture of two Gaussian distributions (one for high status cars, another for other cars). Removing rater variance from the status ratings did not affect the distribution. The two-peaked shape of the distribution suggested we employ a binary categorical variable as indicator of car status. Audi, BMW, Jaguar, Lexus, and Mercedes-Benz were classified as high status cars. A total of 189 (10.0%) households had at least one high-status car.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and the correlations between age, sex, income, personality, and having a high status car are shown in SOM Table S4. Age was negatively and household income positively correlated with status car ownership. Personality traits were not correlated with status car ownership.

Binary logistic regression analyses predicting car status were run to examine multivariate associations between personality and car status (see Table 1). Of the demographic variables, age and household income predicted car status (Model 1). Adding personality traits did not improve the model, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 7.85$, $p = .165$ (Model 2). However, the coefficient for Conscientiousness was statistically significant ($B = 0.23$, $p = .029$, $OR = 1.26$; when entered alone, $B = 0.16$, $p = .058$, $OR = 1.18$). Adding the interaction terms between gender and personality traits improved model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 12.04$, $p = .034$ (Model 3). Examination of the individual traits showed that gender moderated the association between Agreeableness and status car ownership, $B = 0.51$, $p = .009$, $OR = 1.66$. Excluding other gender × personality trait interactions did not influence the model, $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 5.13$, $p = .274$, and the interaction term remained significant, $B = 0.46$, $p = .009$, $OR = 1.59$. Further investigating this interaction revealed that Agreeableness (negatively) predicted car status among men ($B = –0.41$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .003$, $OR = 0.67$), but not among women ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .673$, $OR = 1.06$). The predicted probabilities of status car ownership as function of Agreeableness are depicted for both genders in Figure 1. The interaction between gender and extraversion was also statistically significant ($B = 0.43$, $p = .046$, $OR = 1.53$), but this association was dependent on the choices that we made when analyzing the data (the interaction was rendered insignificant when outliers were included or when income was not controlled for, Tables S1 and S3). Including the interaction terms between income and personality traits did not improve the model, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 5.50$, $p = .358$, and the interaction between gender and Agreeableness was significant regardless of whether income was included or not (see Model 4 in Table 1 and Model 3 in Table S3).

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

4. Discussion

The present study was motivated by the authors' everyday experience of most traffic violations being committed by male drivers of high status cars. The academic literature confirmed this observation, and suggested an explanatory role for the corruptive effects of wealth. However, we sought to investigate a complementary explanation: perhaps certain people, who are due to their underlying psychological dispositions generally more aggressive or antagonistic towards people, norms, and obligations, are also more likely to drive high status cars? As expected, disagreeable men were more likely to drive high status cars. Moreover, high Conscientiousness also predicted driving a high status car.

The present results speak to some of the most influential and important research on the possible corruptive effects of wealth. This research (e.g., Piff, 2012) has used driving a high status car as an indicator of SES. However, our results suggest that a high status car is not only indicative of high SES, but also of underlying personality traits. This means that the often observed associations between driving a high status car and unethical driving behavior may not be due to the corruptive effects of high social class, but rather due to the underlying personality traits that dispose certain people to purchase high status cars.

Finland, like the other Nordic welfare countries, is rather equal country in terms of income differences, and this may have implications for the associations between personality and consumption of high status products. Consumption of high status products is less frequent in more equal contexts (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). In this type of context, high status cars could signal not only competence and achievements, but also a lack of modesty or humbleness. Our findings, especially regarding Agreeableness, could thus be culture specific in the sense that they would not generalize to more hierarchical countries, in which it would be more normative to signal high social status. Whether the cultural context moderates the associations between personality traits and conspicuous consumption is an intriguing question for future research.

More generally, given the extensive literature on the personality determinants of various types of consumer behavior, the dearth of research on the associations between personality and conspicuous consumption is striking. In the current era of growing economic inequality the consumption of luxury goods is likely to burgeon. Knowledge of who buys luxury goods may help better understand the motives underlying this type of consumption. This knowledge can be used not only for marketing, advertising, promotional, or other purposes with financial benefits, but also for other, arguably more serious, social or moral purposes.

Ethical Compliance

Funding: This research was supported by the Academy of Finland research grant 309537.

Compliance with Ethical Standards: All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study.

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Table 1

Summary of Logistic Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Status Car Ownership

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*
Constant	–2.30	0.08	<.001	–2.32	0.09	<.001	–2.43	0.10	<.001	–2.45	0.10	<.001
Gender	0.33	0.16	.039	0.38	0.17	.027	0.40	0.19	.029	0.40	0.19	.030
Age	–0.02	0.01	<.001	–0.02	0.01	<.001	–0.02	0.01	<.001	–0.02	0.01	<.001
Income	0.32	0.08	<.001	0.31	0.08	<.001	0.32	0.08	<.001	0.30	0.08	<.001
N				–0.02	0.11	.875	–0.01	0.11	.921	–0.00	0.12	.981
E				–0.11	0.10	.288	–0.11	0.11	.286	–0.11	0.11	.306
O				–0.00	0.10	.980	–0.01	0.10	.956	–0.02	0.10	.874
A				–0.16	0.09	.094	–0.17	0.10	.090	–0.14	0.10	.161
C				0.23	0.10	.029	0.25	0.11	.018	0.22	0.11	.047
N × Gender							0.09	0.23	.679	0.09	0.23	.706
E × Gender							0.43	0.21	.046	0.45	0.22	.035
O × Gender							–0.02	0.20	.935	–0.01	0.20	.978
A × Gender							0.51	0.19	.009	0.52	0.20	.008
C × Gender							–0.05	0.21	.807	–0.03	0.21	.894
N × Income										–0.06	0.10	.549
E × Income										–0.10	0.10	.338
O × Income										0.11	0.10	.267
A × Income										–0.11	0.09	.204
C × Income										0.17	0.10	.104
χ^2	1130.50			1122.65			1110.61			1105.11		
df	4			9			14			19		

Note: n = 1818. Gender coded as –0.5 for male and 0.5 for female. N = Neuroticism. E = Extraversion. O = Openness. A = Agreeableness. C = Conscientiousness. Personality traits and Household Income were standardized prior to analysis.

Figure 1. The predicted probabilities of status car ownership as a function of Agreeableness